

Hunt raises many questions

by Julie Green

Each spring the harp seal hunt takes place off of the coast of Newfoundland. Up to 180,000 whitecoats (seals up to three weeks old) and beaters (seals up to one year old) are hunted in March and April by local sealers. The hunt originated three hundred years ago and the controversy about the hunt continues.

Seals are hunted primarily for their fur. The fur pelts are shipped to Europe where they are made into coats and other clothing items.

The fur however, is used with the wrong side facing out. To heat the wearer effectively, the fur must be worn next to the body. Thus as U of A environmentalist Dennis Wighton says, fur coats as they are now made and used are non-functioning status symbols.

But rather than becoming entangled in emotional arguments, aesthetics and value judgements, it is worthwhile to look at the facts of the seal hunt. Draw your own conclusions.

It is difficult to determine the exact size of the harp seal herd because the animal is difficult to count. However, based on an infrared photographic method of counting whitecoated harp seals, Fisheries Canada estimates that the herd is about 1.3 to 1.4 million. About 350,000 seals were born this spring off the coast of Labrador.

The seal weighs about 15 pounds at birth and gains another 85 pounds during its short three week weaning period.

Because seals consume eight to ten per cent of their body weight in food each day, some people argue that unless the herds are thinned out, they would seriously damage commercial fishing off of Newfoundland. This is untrue since the seals migrate north to Baffin Island during the summer commercial fishing season. "The problem is that the area is overfished. So the bottom is stripped of fish," says Dennis Wighton, a genetic administrative officer at the U of A and a member of Greenpeace. In fact the capelin, the mainstay fish of the seals' diet may soon supplement the more popular cod and herring which have been depleted.

Approximately 12,000 sealers were licensed by Fisheries Canada for the hunt in 1978. There are basically three groups of sealers: about 700 operate from large vessels, 6,000 landmen who operate on foot and the Inuit who have a different set of rules governing their hunt.

Other people present at the hunting site include Fisheries officers and observers. The Fisheries officers monitor the size of the seal catch and enforce the government's *Seal Protection Act*, a set of guidelines brought forth in 1978 which detail killing methods, club size and licensing operations.

Observers need a permit to view the hunt, according to a regulation instituted in 1978. "Permits were introduced for the government to obtain information about the groups interested in the hunt," says Wighton. The permit application asks for the observers' reasons for wanting the permit, and the areas and dates they are likely to visit. Permits are also a safety measure, since moving about on ice floes is fairly dangerous. The permit is violated when an observer interferes with the hunt by, for example, dying the seal coats to render them useless. This measure is a popular form of protest.

The seal hunting quota imposed by Fisheries Canada is 170,000 seals per year. The quota is determined by the formula called Optimal Sustainable Yield (OSY). OSY is supposed to maintain the balance of the ecosystem and the portion of one species to another. What exactly constitutes a "balance" is undefined. "Although the seal is difficult to count, I think the quota is safe. It does permit a slow population increase," says Dr. Ian Stirling of the Canadian Wildlife Service.

Environmentalists claim the seal is nearing extinction. "Seals aren't extinct, but on the other hand if we have no accurate estimate of the herd size, I don't think we should kill them without knowing all the facts," says Wighton.

"Humane killing is rendering an animal unconscious as fast as possible to achieve not death but to prevent the sensation of pain," says Wighton. Stress

is the major problem not accounted for in a definition of humane killing. "The animals aren't dumb, they can sense blood and death," he says. "The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) is investigating the stress issue," he says.

The *Seal Protection Act* says that a seal is dead when it is glassy eyed with a staring appearance and when there is no blinking reflex when the eye is touched and the seal's body is in a relaxed condition.

A variety of killing methods have been tested and the two preferred are clubbing and shooting. Clubbing with a spiked bat called a hakapik is the most popular method. The hakapik is made of hardwood and is about 25 inches in length and 2 inches in diameter. Shooting is permitted with bullets that are not made of metal or pointed, but it is not preferred because of the danger it might pose to other hunters. "One hard blow to the seal's forehead should be sufficient to kill it because the seal pups' skulls are like eggshells," said Stirling.



A sealer separates pelts from carcasses on an ice floe at the hunt site.

"One method of killing is not better than another. The problem is the inexperience of the sealers," says Wighton. "They have no apprenticeship to learn killing methods. Fisheries try to educate sealers through literature but still they should not be learning killing methods on the job. Hunters who have little or no experience killing seals heighten the pain and stress factors associated with the seals' death," says Wighton.

There have been charges by protestors that seals are skinned alive. "The residual oxygen and nerve action will make the animal twitch after it is dead," said Stirling. "It is impossible to skin a seal alive; they have sharp teeth and long claws," he says.

Since seals are hunted principally for their pelts there is a question about what is done with the rest of the seal. "I suspect they are just left there," says Wighton. "It is not economic to bring the carcasses in, so the seal meat is used locally. It is hard to separate the bone and sinew of the meat so only about 20-25 per cent of the seal is used. The meat has a strong taste and is oily. One must acquire a taste for it," says Stirling.

Many people question the kinship felt between the mother seal and her pup. "There is some feeling there, though it is difficult to define what," says Wighton. The pup is weaned in a very short time and after that period the mother will cast the pup off. The protective instinct, based on a hormonal attraction, is very strong during the weaning period. At this time she will



"With quite rare exceptions the mother seals are not interested in the events on the ice. It must, therefore, be doubted, in my opinion, that any significant measure of cruelty is inflicted upon the mother seals." BRUNO SCHIEFER, DVM, lecturing professor, Institute of Animal Pathology, University of Munich, evidence for the House of Commons Standing Committee on Fisheries and Forestry, 1969.

protect the young against predators. However, after she has cast the pup off, she will actually bite it if it comes back to her, Stirling says.

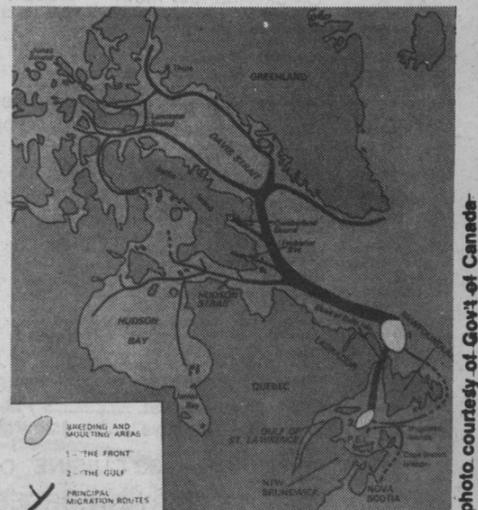
The 1979 report of the government's Committee on Seals and Sealing suggests that "additional research is required on the behaviour of

It cost the government \$706,000 to manage the 1977 hunt. The breakdown of this figure includes \$227,000 spent on research into the seal population size and the economy of the seal industry and \$264,000 for wages to the Fisheries officers monitoring the hunt. Also included in the initial expenditure is \$84,000 on publications and correspondence about the hunt, \$31,000 for management and \$100,000 to the Committee on Seals and Sealing, the body charged to advise and making recommendations to the government on the improvement of the hunt and seal industry. "One must compare how much the sealer is getting compared to how much the tax payer is spending on subsidies and service enforcement of the hunt," says Wighton.

If the seal hunt was discontinued, alternative work would have to be found for the former sealers. One such alternative might be to enhance the ship building industry in Newfoundland, says Wighton. "This way you are not disrupting the fishermen's homes or their feel for the sea," says Wighton. A government publication called *Questions and Answers* claims that in the fishing based economies of the coastal communities, unemployment reaches 90 per cent during March and April.

The seal hunt should be protested, says Wighton. The best medium to get the point across is television. "It displays the hunt for what it really is. You have to put the hunt in the individual's living room," he says.

The protest should switch to Europe where the pelts are purchased. That would be the best place to begin an effective protest," says Stirling.



Seals are hunted off of the coast of Newfoundland during March and April each year. The seals migrate north to Baffin Island during the summer.

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